

**Summer 2008 Teaching with Primary Sources Newsletter**  
**Learning Activity – Secondary Level**

**JACKIE ROBINSON: “THIS I BELIEVE”**

**OVERVIEW**

Overview

Students work in groups to analyze and assemble unidentified phrases from a speech by Jackie Robinson entitled “This I Believe” to make predictions and inferences about the complete text. In this speech, Robinson attributes his success and the prospect of limitless opportunity for all Americans to the United States’ status as “a free society.” Students write and compare predictions and inferences before reading and analyzing Robinson’s entire speech. Through this activity, students will continue building their reading skills and develop a richer understanding of the Civil Rights Movement. As part of a Civil Rights Movement unit, this activity could begin the process of helping students understand the diversity of individuals, groups, and viewpoints surrounding the struggle for civil rights.

Objectives

After completing this learning activity, students will be able to:

- Apply the literacy skills of prediction and inference
- Analyze examples of effective writing
- Discuss the role of Jackie Robinson and his views in the context of the Civil Rights Movement

Time Required

One to two class periods

Grade level

9-12

Topic/s

African American History

Era/s

Postwar United States, 1945-1968

Standards

**McREL 4th Edition Standards and Benchmarks**

<http://www.mcrel.org/compendium/browse.asp>

*Language Arts*

Standard 5. Uses the general skills and strategies of the reading process

Standard 7. Uses reading skills and strategies to understand and interpret a variety of informational texts

*United States History*

Standard 29. Understands the struggle for racial and gender equality and the extension of civil liberties

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#### Credits

Adapted from an activity by TPS-Loyola University based on the “tea party” pre-reading strategy presented in the following book:

Beers, Kylene. When Kids Can’t Read: What Teachers Can Do: A Guide for Teachers 6-12. Portsmouth: Heinemann, 2003.

#### PREPARATION

#### Materials

Have these materials ready before the activity:

- Select 12-16 different phrases from Jackie Robinson’s “This I Believe” speech <http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/treasures/tri070.html> and write individual phrases on index cards. Choose phrases that give insight into the speech’s subject, meaning and context. Prepare one set of index cards for each small group of four to five students. (See sample index cards included.)
- Jackie Robinson’s complete “This I Believe” speech (one copy per student or prepare to provide Web access to the document).

#### Resources

Background for the lesson:

Jackie Robinson’s “This I Believe” speech was originally an essay entitled "Free Minds and Hearts at Work," and its language and prose are characteristic of Robinson, according to his biographer, Arnold Rampersad. The essay was prepared for presentation on the 1950s radio program, "This I Believe," and subsequently published in Edward R. Murrow's book, This I Believe: The Living Philosophies of One Hundred Thoughtful Men and Women in All Walks of Life (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1952-54).

#### Additional Resources

- Background on Jackie Robinson: <http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/treasures/tri042.html>
- Background on the original 1950s “This I Believe” radio show: <http://www.npr.org/thisibelieve/about.html>
- Text and audio recording of Jackie Robinson’s essay “Free Minds and Hearts at Work” that aired circa 1952 on the original “This I Believe” radio program and additional background on Robinson: <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=4536142>

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**PROCEDURE**

**Activity (one to two class periods)**

*Note: Do not identify the document until Step 8 below.*

- 1) Select the first paragraph of a novel, a non-fiction account, such as a letter, or another document of interest to students. Read part of the selection aloud to the entire class and ask students to predict what the rest of the text is about. Discuss briefly how they arrived at their conclusions. Remind students of the importance of using prediction and inference to understand subject, meaning and context when reading.
- 2) Explain that students will be using their reading skills to analyze an historical document. Working in small groups, they will receive cards with key phrases taken from its text.
- 3) Have students assemble into groups of four or five. Shuffle each set of index cards and distribute one set of cards to each group.
- 4) Explain to the class that each group's members should discuss how they think the phrases relate, then physically assemble the phrases in a way they think recreates the document. Instruct groups to write a "We think" statement that describes what they think the document is about, using the phrases as evidence to support their conclusions.
- 5) After 15-20 minutes, have groups share their "We think" statements with the class. Ask groups to explain the reasoning behind their inferences about the document's subject and meaning so all students can benefit and learn from others' processes. Encourage students to speculate about the document, its author, and its historical context, using words and phrases as evidence. Possible questions include:
  - What do you notice about word choice, tone and writing style?
  - Do you think this is a public or private document?
  - Are there any indications of time period?
  - Who do you think wrote this? Who is the intended reader/audience?
  - What do you think was the author's purpose in writing this?
  - What words or phrases do you think might be missing from the text?
- 6) Display or distribute copies of Jackie Robinson's "This I Believe" speech. Discuss Robinson's historical role and this speech's context with students, as needed, before reading aloud the document's complete text.
- 7) Ask students to compare how Robinson assembled the phrases with how the groups assembled the phrases. Discuss how phrasing and ordering of words can be used to effectively express subject and meaning. Encourage students to identify and discuss examples of effective writing in the speech that communicate Robinson's beliefs.

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**PROCEDURE (CONT'D)**

- 8) Conclude the discussion by asking students to consider the role of Jackie Robinson and his beliefs in the context of the Civil Rights Movement. What influence do they think Robinson's "This I Believe" speech may have had on the American public during that time period?

Extension

Ask students to compare Jackie Robinson's original essay, "Free Hearts and Minds at Work," to his subsequent "This I Believe" speech. Discuss how Robinson revised the essay for use as a speech and possible reasons for his revisions (e.g., dramatic effect, audience, time limit).

**EVALUATION**

- Teacher observation of collaborative work.
- Based on written group statements, students read and assembled the pieces of the speech and were able to articulate their predictions and inferences about the historic document's subject and meaning.
- Based on class discussion, students were able to analyze Jackie Robinson's speech to understand his role and beliefs in the context of the Civil Rights Movement.

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**Sample Index Cards for Jackie Robinson: “This I Believe” Learning Activity**

|   |  |
|---|--|
| I cannot ever put aside the feeling   | . . . that what has happened to me is based upon a fundamental implied in every document upon which our form of government is based. |
| I do not believe that we have found perfection.   | . . . and this chance exists so long as our free society exists.   |
| A free society has room for motion . . .  | And I believe that under the American Flag, goodness, and righteousness cannot long be stifled.                                      |
| But <u>my</u> fight took place in a free society . . . and that meant that I never once was forced to face an immovable object. | That injustice will wither . . . and that what I did was done TO me and FOR me.  |
| Each time I look at my children, I can say to them . . . whatever the obstacle . . . there’s a chance for you.                  | . . . and when the hearts and minds of a free society are given space to breathe and think . . .                                     |
| Here, there is nothing static . . . no medieval logic that can prevent any of us from taking a forward step.                    | Handicaps, stumbling blocks, prejudice . . . all of these are imperfect.   |
| To say that every person, in every walk of life, will find fulfillment . . .  | This I do not believe.   |
| A chance for you to do whatever you want to become whatever you want . . . to become whatever you want to become . . .          | I DO believe that what I as an individual do . . . that what every member of our society does . . . can help us attain perfection.   |